

A Cultural Materialism Analysis of Orwell's *1984*

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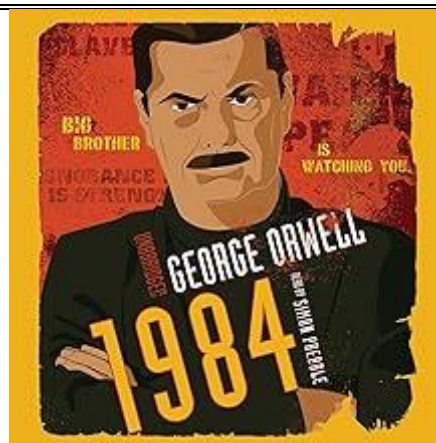
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Abstract

The paper examines a text through a cultural materialist lens to uncover its deeper meanings, particularly how societal control is exerted through institutions. It highlights the ways these institutions can lead to a state of subjugation, leaving individuals feeling powerless and marginalized. In essence, it seeks to illuminate the mechanisms of power that shape individual lives and limit autonomy. The author brilliantly used his imagination and proved that how a cultural control through constant monitoring can raise the power of government which ultimately converts into a totalitarian state. The novel *1984* (1949) is a novel with universal appeal and warns the reader that how a dominance of ideal and imposition of ideology can be so destructive for individual freedom and expression. Using fundamental ideas from literary theory, the study focuses on bringing cultural materialism to text analysis, showing how cultural domination compromises social welfare and individual

freedom. It looks at how this dynamic widens the gap between the general public and the elite, emphasizing the structural injustices brought about by institutional power structures.

Keywords: *1984*, George Orwell, culture, materialism, ideology, dominance, tele-screen

Human civilizations are greatly influenced by culture, which reflects the identities and social behaviors of local populations. Although it promotes unity and a sense of belonging among individuals, it may also facilitate oppression and social division. In this sense, culture forms the basis of power relations, impacting the state's use of its authority and helping to preserve inequality. Eric Blair, the most iconic author of the twentieth century better known as George Orwell, the visionary and a perfect predictor of society who already propounded that the future generations will be controlled by popular media like Television and he showed how the powerful social magnates will control the capital, prestige, power and resources. He experimented with his far frightening work *1984*, where he predicted an imaginary world in which the government is ruled *Big Brother* and how he controlled with his ministries, thought police and media.

The paper is written with aim to understand the Orwell's point of view on how the cultural dominance and controlling the thinking of people become so devastating. Once you read the novel after understanding and implementing the literary theory of Cultural Materialism in comprehending the Orwell discourse through his characters and novel *1984*. The theory of Cultural Materialism was propounded Sir Raymond Williams and it is a cultural movement that began in last quarter of the twentieth century. The main objective of this literary movement is to understand the undercurrent of power control and how a society is regulated by social institutions, and it also covers a wider range of criticism inspiring from Marxism to Feminist criticism, and includes all critical literary theories by and large. This paper gives an insight to the reader to see any literary text from a cultural point of view rather than its traditional features like theme, characterization, narrative technique. This method understands a text in a practical and relevant way to justify that reading of text and how it affects our thinking and ideology.

1984 (1949) is not just a novel but it offers a pattern to study the society within a cultural realm. The novel is a political allegory, and it is highly symbolic in nature, if one can

read the social context in which the novel was written he can easily connect all the dots and get a complete picture that why Orwell was writing such a powerful novel in the most depressive environment. The characters in the novel and the atmosphere symbolize a lot of things. Some of the characters within the novel are allegorical - Big Brother, a character which was almost invisible yet present everywhere, represented the tyrant ruler of Russia Joseph Stalin, the Russian people were reflected through Thought Police, Leo Trotsky supporters were shown as Brotherhood. Through the character of Julia and Winston the author highlights the plight of people who try to challenge the authority of Big Brother. Winston was the face of the broken society who had a broken marriage, disappointment from his job and a feeling of hatred to the government and that is why he was frustrated while working in the Ministry of love. He sensed that the people are brainwashed through *Newspeak* and *Doublespeak*. Julia, on the other hand, was similar to a kind of dual personality because openly she followed and supported the party lines yet within heart she rebelled and enjoyed defying the laws and she chose to have a sexual relationship with Winston.

The Party had a very negative approach to love and marriage, and this is very much similar to most of the traditional religion. The party believed that sex is just a process to have babies and not enjoyment. All the marriage was supposed to get permission from an internal committee and if the couple accepted that they were physically engaged then their marriage was disapproved. The main objective of the Party was to approve marriage for children which are used like a commodity for party. The Party formed several groups which brainwashed people and make love, affection between couple as a taboo and they called for complete celibacy. The party impose light punishment on prostitution, and this was done intentionally so that the people should involve in sex but not in love and emotions. They understood that love brings loyalty and connects people and therefore they try to kill the 'instincts'.

The proles are engaged in fake patriotism and false promises. They were hooked to the telescreens and a special kind of language was supported called *Ingsoc* or English socialism. They used a new kind of English language which is short, confusing and non-appealing. They simply want to make people busy with irrelevant things and that is why they keep on presenting the continuous war with Eurasia and East Asia. They gave the worst

services and products in the name of catchy slogans like the proles have the *Victory Grin*, *Victory Cigarettes* and *Victory Coffee*. The day begins with outrageous propaganda of ‘Two Minute Hate Speech’ where anchors shout on the members of outer party and its representative Goldstein. He was made responsible for all problems and the people were conditioned to think on the lines of the Party. The members of the Inner Party have the best of facilities, flats, and servants while the majority of people were living in the most pathetic situation, their apartment called *Victory Mansion* which smells like rotten fruit, lifts were not working, there were frequent power cuts, and they were always monitored by a *telescreen*.

Cultural Dominance, a category of culture propounded by Raymond Williams, is visible in the novel *1984* where the Party under the name of Big Brother controlled everything. They have controlled the people’s instinct, emotions and thinking in such a way that only Party matter and issues are important. Though the people are suffering from corruption, frequent wars, poverty, lack of jobs and but they accept the dominant culture, and they feel pride in the ‘Victory Homes’, ‘Victory Cigarettes’ etc. The Party used various platforms that blocked the creative and questioning rationale of the people, they manipulated the facts and established a new set of language in a dictionary which is called *Newspeak*. This dictionary was used for internal purposes i.e. It is a kind of code language which is used to convey a message to the Ministry of Truth employee to manipulate the public. If anyone read the language in *Newspeak* form, he might find it amateur because it is unclear. A sample of *Newspeak* is given below:

times. 17.3.84 bb speech malreported africa rectify
times 19.12.83 forecasts 3 yp 4th quarter 83 misprints verify current issue
times 3.12.83. reporting bb dayorder doublesplusungood refs unpersons rewrite fullwise
upsub antefilling (1984 P.42-43)

Winston Smith was a part of ‘emergent culture’ that challenges the authority and dominance of culture. He was keeping a diary in which he note everything though keeping a diary was a part of *thoughtcrime*, not only that he also indulged in romantic relationship with Julia and Winston also got separated from his wife Kathrine and he was a feeling disappointed with Big Brother and that is why he wrote ‘Down with Big Brother’. He also thought of a rebel when he was thinking of getting associated with the outer party leader

Goldstein Manifesto. Unfortunately, at the end he was broken and he surrendered to the legacy of Big Brother.

Power is one of the main issues of tussle between the classes and in this novel the power is attained to an extent of totalitarianism. The omnipresence of Big Brother and the manner in which people were moulded to accept the ideology of the Party is incredible. The Party establishes slogans like 'War is Peace', 'Freedom is Slavery' and 'Ignorance is Strength' which are oxymorons in sense but hold a great sense of power and dominance. The party used a strategy in which people had no choice either to get their mind programmed by the *Ministry of Truth* where they were tortured through direct police like Thought police. The control on the people was so tight that nobody dared to think about the past. The protagonist attempts to remember the glorious Revolutionary days when he had a sweet family who sacrificed their life for a better tomorrow, which was living as the absolute opposite. He was in fear because he knew that thinking about the past is considered a crime called *oldthink*. The working class were kept engaged in constant fear of the unknown, sometimes of the scarcity of food or sometimes of wars with Eurasia or Eastasia. Many people even don't remember the actual past because the facts were changed, history was altered and anchors on TV keep spreading propaganda against the opposition leader Goldstein. All questions and problems were blamed on Goldstein and Big Brother was worshiped. This one-man worship gave the supreme power to a man and people were like insects to it.

The technology was brutally exploited by the party on a large scale if they are useful enough to control people. For example, they used *telescreens* to monitor people and spread Ingsoc propaganda, but in other areas it remains stagnant like the printing machines in the Records Department were basic and the party used same bombs in war against Eurasia or Eastasia. Scientific progresses were stopped if they don't fulfill Party needs but continued if they contribute to Party goals. The food rationing was controlled, services were pathetic, only slogans, fake patriotism and emotions were sold. There was no place for privacy and identity and people were subjugated like subhumans. This kind of hypocrisy is another example of how a government becomes totalitarian if they abuse power.

The citizens were regulated in every possible manner of life including their speech, ideology, work and sex. A constant fear was instilled in their minds that ‘Big Brother is Watching You’ through *telescreens* which moderates all activities of citizens, and no one could hide from it and this kind of mass surveillance system mingled with media propaganda is enough to snatch power from people eliminating them to participate in a democracy. Those who try to criticize were *vaporized* and become *unpersons* and all their records were deleted and put them in a *memory hole*. The party gave people opium of fake national pride and false promises which kept them hopeful for a golden future despite living in a cumbersome present. The party understood that people should get aware, and this was the reason that they keep manipulating the facts in news, history, and science everywhere. Winston Smith was morally conscious and that is why he kept saying about freedom as: “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two makes four” and warns about “Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs ... and accepting both of them”. He knew that for power and dominance the party will enforce their *Ingsoc* doctrine that made people to *Duckspeak* or *Doublethink* where they say ‘Two and two make five’

One of the most important ways that the Party adopted is to transmit its principles through an indirect method which can be called Ideological State Apparatus. This method was given by Louis Althusser in 1970 from his famous book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. He proved that the government implements its ideas and principles through various direct and indirect methods. For direct methods they may use police, law, courts, and the army which is visible and powerful, but the indirect method is more effective as it affects people psychologically and they accept it as normal. The state uses various social institutions like religion, school, church, family, social norms, and media to change the approach of society. This method of control is seen in the theme of *1984* where the government uses psychological manipulation. The Records Department in the Ministry of Truth manipulates with the facts it keeps shifting the goals and history was rewritten. Sometimes they say that *Oceania* is at war with *Eurasia* and the other day they announce that *Eurasia* was *Oceania* ally and *Eastasia* is the nation’s enemy. The people were heavily monitored by the government and everywhere the slogan that ‘Big Brother is Watching You’ is present. People are unable to access pleasure and privacy as they are under surveillance of the *telescreens* which have two purposes only, one to spread Party's propaganda and the other is to monitor

everything. The institution of marriage which is sacred was depending on the mercy of a *committee's* approval. People's sexual urges were suppressed, and the most shocking thing was that even kids were involved in parental monitoring so the whole world is an absolute dystopia.

The state controlled the language with no emphasis on grammar and classic literature was abandoned or discouraged. People were brainwashed with idiotic programs aired on *telescreens* which begin with 'Two minutes Hate Speech' which only put all the burden of failures on Ennamuel Goldstein, the leader in opposition. It is quite interesting to know that neither Big Brother nor Goldstein were physically seen but their presence on *telescreens* and posters were so impressive but ironically nobody didn't question the existence and relevance of both. Any sign of mistrust is a severely punishable offence under *Thoughtcrime*. Ironically, the brute force that controls the punishment and retribution of *Thoughtcrime*, is called the *Ministry of Love*, for the aim of crushing *Thoughtcrime* is to invest the masses with unconditional love towards the philosophy of the Ingsoc, and the political figure of Big Brother.

Newspeak reduces and limits the number of words in the English language, and removes words used to describe rebellion or independence (with the ultimate goal being to remove citizens' ability to think anti-Party thoughts). Interestingly, the Party works to form a language around itself rather than naturally accepting and assuming the language of the people that make up the country. In this way, language is used as yet another mechanism of mind control.

The party use *Newspeak* as a plan of limiting the thinking of citizens and they worked really hard in this direction. They used a parallel new language with a dictionary compiled every year with words like '*unperson*', '*ungood*', '*memoryhole*', '*doublethink*', '*oldspeak*', '*duckspeak*', etc. The ultimate goal is to suppress any ind of rebel idea or a thought to germinate and in case they fail they use the repressive measure like torture, killing and deleting the records of that individual. They have dedicated Ministries like the Ministry of Love which maintain law and order and it actually used to torture people. People's old memories were depleted with facts now nobody remembers the past even Winston doesn't remember his father and holds a faded memory of his mother and sister.

A culture depends a lot on its language and literature and by removing the nation's language they diluted the nation's rich history and culture. Languages are deeply intertwined with a country's soul and its traditions. The Big Brother and his Party hampered this thread of connection with the past and replaced the standard English with Newspeak which gave a sense of confusion among the aware citizens but since the people were brainwashed, they lost the ability to ask questions, and they accepted everything as natural. The party thus met its goal to condition people's psychology and made them puppet citizens.

The novel is highly relevant to all societies, and it possess a universal appeal as it uncovers a hidden weapon of government who control the masses through mass surveillance and the power of media is so dreadful in brainwashing the people. Orwell is absolutely true and visionary in seeing the power of technology and control of people using social institutions like school, government bodies and media to make people overly dependent and subjugated. He also warns the society that overpower consumption results into mass destruction in a psychological form. The cultural aspect is often seen in a extremely positive way but not in a political way which is often used and dominated by the businessman or capitalists and politicians who enjoys everything and the common people lives in dreams of social, democratic nationhood but the reality is simply opposite.

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